

3.1 AESTHETICS

This section of the EIR discusses the impacts of the project on aesthetics and visual character of the existing environmental setting, including the aesthetic qualities of the project site and the overall change in character of the project area with implementation of the proposed project. The primary visual and aesthetic concerns include the change in character of the project site from rural residential and agricultural uses to commercial uses, and the potential impacts to views from adjacent viewpoints, including U.S. Highway 101, the Cochrane Road interchange, and surrounding properties. Visual impacts were evaluated using a combination of a site reconnaissance, photo documentation, aerial photographs, and review of existing policy documents, including the *City of Morgan Hill General Plan*.

3.1.1 EXISTING ENVIRONMENTAL SETTING

REGIONAL SETTING

The City of Morgan Hill is located in the southern portion of the County of Santa Clara, approximately 12 miles south of the City of San José and ten miles north of the City of Gilroy. The southern Santa Clara Valley is approximately four miles wide with predominantly flat terrain. Important visual features include the surrounding Santa Cruz Mountain Range to the west and the Diablo Mountain Range to the east.

The City of Morgan Hill has grown into a mid-size city with a small downtown area and high-quality residential neighborhoods. The City has developed relatively slowly over the past 25 years, due to a voter-approved Residential Development Control System which limits residential development to approximately 250 units per year. Therefore, the City is characterized by urbanized areas interspersed with areas designated for development but not which have not yet been developed.

Of the approximately 21,700 acres within the City's sphere of influence, less than 3,400 are developed with residential, commercial, or industrial uses. The *City of Morgan Hill General Plan* provides for an additional 3,400 acres of urban development. In 1996, the City Council adopted a long-term Urban Growth Boundary (UGB), which differentiates land within the Sphere of Influence intended for future urbanization from land intended to remain rural and unincorporated for the next 20 years (Morgan Hill 2004). The UGB in combination with other General Plan policies has resulted in a delineation between rural County land uses and the urban area within the UGB, as well in protection of open space on hillsides. The delineation of urban, rural, and undeveloped hills are key aspects of Morgan Hill's community character.

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VISUAL CHARACTER OF THE PROJECT SITE

The project site is located on the northeast corner of the intersection of the U.S. Highway 101 and Cochrane Road interchange at the northern edge of the City of Morgan Hill. The Cochrane Road/U.S. Highway 101 interchange serves as the northern gateway of the City of Morgan Hill. The topography of the project site is relatively flat with a site elevation of approximately 390 feet to 380 feet above mean sea level, from east to west. The project site contains approximately 118 trees, primary black walnut, that are scattered throughout the site.

The 66.49-acre project site is generally level and consists of five irregular-shaped parcels under ownership by three separate landowners: the Millerd-Low property (Assessors Parcel Number: 728-37-001), Guglielmo property (Assessors Parcel Numbers: 728-37-002, -005, -007); and Sullivan property (Assessor Parcel Number 728-37-004). Improvements on the Millerd-Low property consists of a 12-acre parcel located at the northeast corner of the project site. The project site is occupied by a horse boarding facility, two residences, and seven out-buildings including a garage, tack rooms, a pump house, a restroom, and a hay barn. The remainder of this parcel consists of fenced pastureland. The Guglielmo property consists of three irregularly-shaped parcels totaling 38-acres in the central and southern portions of the project site. Existing improvements include a small vineyard located in the northern portion of the property and row crops in the southern part of the property. A residence and associated barn and pump house are located in the central area of the property. The Sullivan property comprises 16.5 acres located in the western portion of the site. This parcel is being dry farmed for wheat and contains no structures or other site improvements. Photographs which show the existing rural residential and agricultural character of the project site are shown in **Figures 2-5** and **2-6** in Section 2, Project Description of this EIR.

Surrounding Land Uses

The project site is located within the city limits of Morgan Hill at the edge of the UGB, which borders the project site to the north. Surrounding land uses include vacant land planned for commercial uses and the De Paul Health Center (formerly the Saint Louise Hospital) located to the south; unincorporated County land currently in agricultural use located within the City's sphere of influence and vacant land located within the city limits designated 'Single-Family Medium' in the *City of Morgan Hill General Plan* located to the east; unincorporated County land, currently in agricultural use located within the City's sphere of influence designated 'Rural County' in the *City of Morgan Hill General Plan* located to the north; and U.S. Highway 101 and the SCVWD drainage channel located west of the project site. Although the project site is undeveloped and currently used for agricultural purposes, the area west of the U.S. Highway 101/Cochrane Road interchange is developed primarily with commercial uses, including the Cochrane Plaza shopping center located at the southwest quadrant of this intersection, and a Chevron Station, two hotels,

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two vacant restaurant pads, and the Madrone Business Park, located at the northwest quadrant of this intersection. Surrounding land uses are shown in the aerial photograph presented in **Figure 2-7** in Section 2, Project Description of this EIR.

SCENIC VISTAS, PUBLIC VIEWS, AND SIGNIFICANT VISUAL FEATURES

Scenic vistas, public views, and significant features are visually important aesthetic qualities of value to the community. These may include beaches, waterways, rolling hills, fields or mountains that comprise an overall visual essence of a region.

The Diablo Mountain Range to the east of the project site forms a scenic backdrop to the project site and represents the dominant visual feature in the area. Additional scenic resources in the vicinity of the project site include the southern edge of the Coyote Creek Parkway located approximately 2,000 feet east of the project site and the Anderson Lake Reservoir located approximately 3,000 feet east of the project site. The project site is not designated as the location of a scenic vista in the *City of Morgan Hill General Plan* or the *County of Santa Clara General Plan*; however, Policy 14a in the *City of Morgan Hill General Plan* designates the Cochrane Road/U.S. Highway 101 interchange as a northern gateway to the City of Morgan Hill, defined as a “key location where people enter and leave the City or its distinct districts.” As such, the *City of Morgan Hill General Plan* calls for enhancing the visual integrity of the gateways of the City, through public improvements that express a pleasant welcome and through use of specific design standards for private development at the gateways, which address the site, landscaping, architecture, and glass.

The project site is visible from several public vantage points, including both southbound and northbound U.S. Highway 101, Cochrane Road, and surrounding land uses. Views from northbound U.S. Highway 101 are slightly obscured by the Cochrane Road overpass, existing vegetation, and the depressed nature of the freeway. Photographs of the project site from U.S. Highway 101 and the Cochrane Road overpass are presented in **Figures 3.1-1A** and **3.1-1B**. While the project site can be considered a gateway site, subject to careful design review, it is not considered a significant visual resource or component of community character.

LIGHT AND GLARE

The terms “glare” and “skyglow” are used to describe the visual effects of lighting in the project area. For the purposes of this analysis, glare is considered to be direct exposure of bright lights and skyglow is a glow that extends beyond the light source and dominates or partially dominates views above the horizon.

Lighting could be perceived as a nuisance by anyone accustomed to the normal darkness of night in a rural area. In general, nighttime lighting is of special concern to observatories, as it interferes with the ability to see stars and other outer space objects. The Lick

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Observatory on Mount Hamilton is located approximately 12 miles northeast of the project site. According to Lick Observatory staff, the observatory prefers that outdoor lighting consist of low-pressure sodium lights, but high-pressure sodium lights with shielded fixtures are also acceptable to the observatory. Lighting in the project area is dominated by surrounding residential uses located east and commercial uses located west of the project site across U.S. Highway 101.

3.2.2 REGULATORY SETTING

The project site has a General Plan designation of ‘Commercial’ in the *City of Morgan Hill General Plan* and a zoning designation of ‘PUD (HC)’ in the *City of Morgan Hill Planning and Zoning Codes*. The *City of Morgan Hill General Plan* designates the project site as the location of a sub-regional commercial site. The project site has been designated for urban uses in the *City of Morgan Hill General Plan* since 1969 (Personal communication with Rebecca Tolentino, Associate Planner, City of Morgan Hill, April 7, 2005).

CITY OF MORGAN HILL GENERAL PLAN

The built environment in the City of Morgan Hill is not dominated by a single theme. The *City of Morgan Hill General Plan* emphasizes that the City’s design standards incorporate a variety of styles and fundamental architectural ideas. Such standards can address building envelope, mass and scale, window and door placement, façade, roof shape, landscaping, parking and other issues. The following policies in the *City of Morgan Hill General Plan* are applicable to the proposed project:

Community Development

Goal 12 A visually attractive urban environment.

Policy 12b Discourage the use of “franchise architecture.”

Policy 12c Improve the appearance of commercial developments by minimizing the amount of parking fronting the street.

Policy 12e Minimize the use of sound walls.

Policy 12f Landscape medians and public areas along major streets and Highway 101 using plant materials, wherever feasible.

Policy 12h Encourage installation of public art in new and renovated non-residential projects.



View of the project site from the Cochrane Road/U.S. Highway 101 Interchange.



View of the project site from the Northbound U.S. Highway 101 off-ramp to Cochrane Road.

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View of the western portion of the project site from Southbound U.S. Highway 101.



View of the slope along the western edge of the project site on Northbound U.S. Highway 101.

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Goal 14 Distinct, attractive gateways to the community.

Policy 14a Enhance the visual integrity of the gateways to the City such as the Madrone area north of Cochrane Road, the Cochrane Road/Monterey Road intersection, Monterey Road south of Watsonville Road, the Cochrane Road, Dunne, and Tennant freeway interchanges, and the railroad station.

Policy 14b Protect the visual integrity of the scenic gateways to the South County (Pacheco Pass, Hecker Pass, Route 101 south of Gilroy, and the Coyote greenbelt area north of Morgan Hill).

Policy 14.1 Develop and implement designs for public improvements at the key gateways to Morgan Hill including: Madrone area north of Cochrane Road, the Cochrane Road/Monterey Road intersection, Monterey Road south of Watsonville Road, the CalTrain station and freeway interchanges at Cochrane, Dunne and Tennant.

Policy 14.2 Develop, adopt and enforce Gateway Design Standards which set forth specific site, landscaping, architectural, and sign design standards for private development at and around the gateways to the community.

City of Morgan Hill Municipal Code

The proposed project would be subject to design review as established in Section 18.74 of the City of Morgan Hill Municipal Code. The purpose of Section 18.74, Design Review, of the City of Morgan Hill Municipal Code is to preserve and enhance the beauty and environmental amenities of the city by:

- Recognizing the interdependence of land values and aesthetics, and to provide a method by which the city may implement this interdependence to the community's benefit;
- Preserving and enhancing the natural beauties of the land and man-made environment, and the enjoyment thereof;
- Maintaining and improving the qualities of and relationships between individual buildings, structures and physical development in such a manner as to best contribute to the amenities and attractiveness of the city;
- Protecting and insuring the adequacy and usefulness of public and private developments as they relate to each other and the neighborhood area;
- Promoting and protecting the safety, convenience, comfort, prosperity and general welfare of the citizens of the city by:

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- Stimulating creative design for individual buildings and structures, and other physical improvements;
- Encouraging the innovative use of materials, methods and techniques;
- Preserving balance and harmony within neighborhoods; and
- Integrating the functions, appearance and locations of buildings and improvements so as to best achieve a balance between private prerogatives and preferences and the public interest and welfare.

The standards addressed in design review include, but are not limited to: harmony of design; design theme; site design standards; mechanical equipment and utilities; energy conservation; wall treatments; doors and windows; lighting; grading and drainage; and parking and landscaping. These standards are initially implemented through staff review of project applications. Ultimately the Architectural Review Board (ARB) reviews all proposals for future developments to assure conformance with these design standards.

CALIFORNIA SCENIC HIGHWAY PROGRAM

The State Legislature created the California Scenic Highway Program in 1963. Its purpose is to preserve and protect scenic highway corridors from change, which would diminish the aesthetic value of lands adjacent to highways. The state laws governing the Scenic Highway Program are found in Section 260 of the Streets and Highways Code. The State Scenic Highway System includes a list of highways that are either eligible for designation as scenic highways or have been so designated. U.S. Highway 101 is not designated a scenic highway in the vicinity of the project site.

3.1.3 IMPACTS AND MITIGATION MEASURES

STANDARDS OF SIGNIFICANCE

The following thresholds for measuring a project's environmental impacts are based on CEQA Guidelines and standards used by the City of Morgan Hill. For the purposes of this EIR, impacts are considered significant if the following could result from implementation of the proposed project:

- Have a substantial adverse effect on a scenic vista;
- Substantially damage scenic resources, including, but not limited to, trees, rock outcroppings, and historic buildings within a state scenic highway;

- Substantially degrade the existing visual character or quality of the site and its surrounding;
- Create a new source of substantial light or glare, which would adversely affect day or nighttime views in the area.

METHODOLOGY

The analysis of the potential aesthetic impacts is based upon review of a site visit and photographs taken of the project site and surrounding areas, background documents provided by the City of Morgan Hill including the *City of Morgan Hill General Plan*, *City of Morgan Hill General Plan EIR*, and *City of Morgan Hill Planning and Zoning Codes*. The aesthetic analysis also utilized the proposed site plan and elevations provided by the project applicant to assess potential visual impacts of the proposed project. This information was used in conjunction with forecasting the predicted effects of eventual urban development at this site.

PROJECT IMPACTS AND MITIGATION MEASURES

Degradation of a State Scenic Highway

The project site is located adjacent to U.S. Highway 101. U.S. Highway 101 is not considered a State Scenic Highway in the vicinity of the project site. Therefore, the proposed project would have **no impact** to scenic resources, including, but not limited to, trees, rock outcroppings, and historic buildings within a state scenic highway. No mitigation measures are necessary.

Substantial Degradation of the Visual Character or Quality of the Project Site and Surroundings

Impact 3.1-1 The proposed project would alter the project site from a rural residential and agricultural use to an urban use with construction of a 657,250 square foot commercial center at the U.S Highway 101/Cochrane Road interchange. This potential change in character at the project site and surrounding area is considered a **less than significant impact**.

The project site is located within the city limits of Morgan Hill at the edge of the UGB, which borders the project site to the north. Existing uses at the project site include rural residential homes and associated agricultural outbuildings; an equestrian facility; and year-round active agricultural land that has been in production since approximately 1917. Until approximately 1970, the project site was part of a larger prune ranch and walnut orchard.

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The proposed project would include demolition of approximately three residential structures and associated outbuildings, removal of approximately 118 trees and vegetation, and construction of a commercial/retail center at the project site.

The proposed project would be comprised of a 657,250 square foot major commercial/retail center that consists of two large anchor stores, including the relocation and expansion of the existing `Target` store (currently located at the Cochrane Plaza Shopping Center at the southwest corner of U.S. Highway 101/Cochrane Road interchange) into a 123,800 square foot store, and construction of a 140,000 square foot large anchor store; ten major commercial/retail stores, which would range in size from 16,000 to 30,000 square feet; 13 retail stores and/or restaurants that would range in size from 4,000 to 12,000 square feet; eight retail/restaurant pads that would range in size from 3,500 to 7,500 square feet; a 63,200 square foot multi-plex cinema with up to 14 screens; and a 10,400 square foot garden center that would be attached to the 140,000 square foot large anchor store. The proposed site plan is shown in **Figure 2-8**. Elevations and schematic building designs of the proposed structures are shown in **Figure 2-9**. According to the schematic elevations and building designs, the height of the majority of the buildings at the project site are anticipated to be between 28 feet and 36 feet. The proposed project includes approximately 3,025 parking spaces, which would be distributed among the commercial uses.

The proposed project includes implementation of a landscaping plan, which includes planting approximately 947 trees and shrubs at the project site. The conceptual landscaping plan is shown in **Figure 2-10**. The final landscaping plan would be subject to review and approval by the City of Morgan Hill Architectural Review Board. Landscaped setback areas are proposed along all the exterior site boundaries, including installation of four to five-foot evergreen shrubs, which would be located along the western border of the project site adjacent to U.S. Highway 101; mounded berms of turf grass located along the frontage of the project site with Cochrane Road; and a six-foot high split fence screen wall and 11-foot high trellis that would be planted with climbing vines, placed on a three to four-foot high berm along the eastern boundary of the project site adjacent to the proposed Mission View Drive extension. The landscaped berm and screening wall would provide for screening of headlight glare at the back side of buildings and loading and unloading areas from the project site to existing and future residential development located to the east of the project site. The stormwater detention ponds located in the northern portion of the project site would be planted with non-irrigated erosion control grass mix and lined with four to five-foot evergreen shrubbery along the perimeter of the ponds.

While the change from existing uses to a shopping center will change the character of the project site, this is not considered a “substantial degradation” because the City design review and project approval process will ensure that the proposed project is an improvement that meets City standards and does not degrade the visual quality of the City.

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The proposed project would continue a pattern of contiguous urban development in this portion of the City of Morgan Hill. The project site has a General Plan designation of 'Commercial' in the *City of Morgan Hill General Plan* and a zoning designation of 'PUD (HC)' in the *City of Morgan Hill Planning and Zoning Codes*. Policy 10.1 in the *City of Morgan Hill General Plan* designates the project site as the location of a sub-regional commercial site. The project site has been designated for urban uses in the City of Morgan Hill General Plan since 1969 (Personal communication with Rebecca Tolentino, Associate Planner, City of Morgan Hill. April 7, 2005).

Viewpoints

The primary view of the project site would be from vehicles traveling along U.S. Highway 101 and Cochrane Road. Policy 14a in the *City of Morgan Hill General Plan* identifies the Cochrane Road freeway interchange with the highway as the northern gateway to the City from U.S. Highway 101. Gateway locations in the City of Morgan Hill require a higher level of design and are subject to review and approval by the Architectural Review Board, which would consider the project design, proposed landscaping and visibility of the proposed project from U.S. Highway 101.

Photographs of the project site from U.S. Highway 101 and the Cochrane Road overpass are presented in **Figures 3.1-1A** and **3.1-1B**. Views of the project site from these two viewpoints are described below:

Northbound U.S. Highway 101. Views from Northbound U.S. Highway 101 are obscured by the Cochrane Road overpass, existing vegetation, and the depressed nature of the freeway. The dominant visual feature from this viewpoint is the Diablo Mountain Range, which provides a scenic backdrop to the project site. With implementation of the proposed project, the rural residential uses and agricultural uses would be replaced with the proposed commercial center. The proposed project would further urbanize this area; however, the proposed project would not obscure the scenic backdrop of the Diablo Mountain Range from this viewpoint.

Southbound U.S. Highway 101. Due to the height and scale of the proposed project and the depressed nature of the highway, the proposed project would have greater visibility from vehicular traffic traveling on southbound U.S. Highway 101. Views from southbound U.S. Highway 101 include the rural residential and agricultural uses located at the project site and existing commercial and industrial uses located west of the highway. The proposed project would replace the rural residential and agricultural character of the project site with the proposed commercial use. The most dominant visual feature from this viewpoint would be the two large anchor stores located along the northern boundary of the project site, as well as the retail stores located along the western boundary of the project site with U.S. Highway 101. According to the Conceptual Landscaping Plan, four to five-foot evergreen shrubs would be located along the northern and western perimeter of the

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project site. This landscaping would partially screen the proposed project from the highway; however, the height and scale of the proposed commercial development would change the visual character of the northeastern gateway to the City.

The *City of Morgan Hill General Plan* anticipated development of the project site with commercial uses and the change in character of the project site is not considered significant because the project site is not considered a key visual resource. Adjacent lands in unincorporated Santa Clara County will continue to provide a sense of rural character beyond the city limit. The City review and approval processes, including review of the proposed project by the Architectural Review Board (ARB) to ensure conformance with the City's design and landscaping standards would ensure that the improvements do not substantially degrade the visual quality of the City from Southbound U.S. Highway 101. Therefore, the proposed project would result in **less than significant impact** on the existing rural character of the area.

Light and Glare

Impact 3.1-2 The proposed project would introduce new sources of lighting that could adversely affect the existing and proposed development in the vicinity of the project site. The increased residual glare and light is considered a **potentially significant impact**.

Construction of the proposed project would result in the introduction of new sources of nighttime lighting. A detailed lighting plan is not available at this stage of development; however, new light sources include, but are not limited to, street and parking lot lighting, interior building lighting for the commercial uses, and security lighting. Stationary light sources have the potential to adversely affect adjacent properties through a "spillover" effect.

New light sources would result in a greater overall level of light at night adjacent to the project area, thus reducing night sky visibility, affecting the Lick Observatory on Mount Hamilton, and affecting the general character of the area. If lighting associated with the proposed project is not consistent with Section 18.74.370 of the City of Morgan Hill Municipal Code and does not include cut-off features and/or shields that would reduce the effects of light and glare on surrounding neighborhoods and the Lick Observatory on Mount Hamilton, this could be considered a **potentially significant impact**.

Mitigation Measure

MM 3.1-1 The project applicant shall prepare and submit a detailed exterior lighting plan that indicates the location and type of lighting that will be used at the project site. The lighting plan shall be consistent with Section 18.74.370 of the City of Morgan Hill Municipal Code. All external

lighting shall be indicated on project improvement plans, subject to review and approval by the City of Morgan Hill.

Preparation and implementation of a detailed exterior lighting plan for the proposed project would reduce this impact to a **less than significant level** by minimizing potential light and glare at the project site and on surrounding areas.

CUMULATIVE IMPACTS AND MITIGATION MEASURES

Cumulative Degradation of Visual Character

Impact 3.1.3 The proposed project in combination with cumulative development would add to the urbanization of the project area, resulting in a visual change within the City of Morgan Hill. This is considered a **less than significant cumulative impact**.

The proposed project in combination with cumulative development would continue to urbanize the City of Morgan Hill. The *City of Morgan Hill General Plan* anticipated the future development of the project site with commercial uses. The overall change in the visual character of the project site from rural residential and agriculture to a 657,250 square foot shopping center would result in a permanent change, but this is not considered a significant impact in that the project site is not considered a significant visual resource in the *City of Morgan Hill General Plan* and the City review and approval processes will ensure that the improvements do not substantially degrade the visual quality of the City. Adjacent County lands would continue to provide the sense of rural character beyond the city limits. Policies in the *City of Morgan Hill General Plan* that emphasize preservation of the rural environment, implemented over time, would address cumulative visual effects resulting from growth in the city limits. Therefore, the proposed project's contribution to the cumulative degradation of visual character in the region would be considered **less than significant**.

REFERENCES/DOCUMENTATION

California Department of Transportation Scenic Highway website:
http://www.dot.ca.gov/hq/LandArch/scenic_highways/index.htm

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Morgan Hill, City of. *City of Morgan Hill General Plan EIR*. March 22, 2001.

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